

## Investigating The Aftermath: Factors Shaping The Well-Being Of Adolescent Girls And Young Women In The Wake Of The Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

*The true and long-term impact of COVID-19 is not yet known. We still don't know the full, long-term effects of COVID-19. With girls at the centre, the COVID-19 epidemic is negatively affecting people's health, social, and economic well-being globally. The pandemic has caused significant changes in the lives of girls. Girls have traditionally been invisible inhabitants in cities; curfews and lockdowns have made it even harder for them to enter the neighbourhoods where they work, study, and live. There has been greater violence against girls. They no longer attend school, have more domestic duties to perform, and have fewer opportunity to make respectable living wages.*

*Due to the circumstances brought about by COVID-19, females are more likely to be exposed to danger. As a result of the pandemic's increased social and economic strains, extended lockdowns are probably going to expose more girls to domestic abuse. Due to COVID-19-related restrictions, young women may be more exposed to online sexual exploitation when they engage in prolonged virtual engagement in environments where cell phones and the internet are widely accessible.*

*In this short amount of time, numerous studies on the relevant topic have been carried out both in India and elsewhere, and their voices have been recommended to the appropriate individuals. In order to gather information for this study, a survey must be conducted to identify the appropriate respondents, hear their voices, and comprehend the challenges they experienced throughout the epidemic. The project's output may be in line with several policy frameworks and pertinent sustainable development objectives.*

*With diverse viewpoints, girls can become more empowered. Governments, Donors, businesses, and other stakeholders (Eliane Lakam, Pavita Singh and Tasnim Abdi) must acknowledge the distinct effects of the epidemic on young women and make investments in innovative strategies to address their most urgent needs. In order for these efforts to be relevant and long-lasting in order to support young women resilience, it is also important to make sure that young women have significant responsibilities in forming policies and research initiatives.*

### Introduction

COVID-19 has affected all aspects of civilization on a global scale. But not everyone is impacted by the virus in the same way. It seems to target both sexes, all ages, and all socioeconomic classes, but it also capitalizes on pre-existing inequalities. The COVID-19

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epidemic has caused an unprecedented global disaster that is impacting people's lives and communities all across the world.

It is increasingly obvious that the viral pandemic has ramifications beyond people's physical health as cases continue to spread throughout the world. While governments attempt to limit the issue, what began as a health emergency is generating profound changes in society. Lockdowns (UNESCO report) which can range from self-isolation to an enforced quarantine with limited exceptions (Taylor, Tegan, 2020) bans on social gatherings, the closure of schools, the suspension of religious gatherings, and the suspension of non-essential industries, such as construction companies and recreation centers, have all been used as responses.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, half of the world's population, about 3.9 billion people, experienced lockdown measures (UNESCO 2020). Although restrictions have eased, preventive measures like facemasks, social isolation, and local lockdowns persist, with the pandemic projected to endure for 12 to 18 months (Taylor, Tegan, 2020). In commitment to gender equality and girls' rights, studies have been commissioned to investigate the specific impact of the pandemic on young women. This initiative is crucial given the heightened risks, including violence exposure, early marriage, and losses in education and health. The study aims to amplify girls' voices, underscore their active role in disaster relief, and offer actionable suggestions for prioritizing their needs in future initiatives (Fergus, Isobel & Winslow, 2020).

Although girls are encountering previously unheard-of difficulties, the project suggests that creative solutions have evolved to support their resilience. Girls are taking the lead globally in promoting remote learning, disseminating essential information, advising on efficient service delivery, and participating in initiatives to stop and address violence. Additionally, programming geared toward adolescents is being developed to assist females from a variety of backgrounds and to promote inclusivity.

### **Why girls and young women?**

In recent months, research on COVID-19 has intensified, focusing predominantly on its medical impacts. However, little attention has been given to the virus's social effects, especially concerning young females aged 15–24 (Lee J., 2020). This critical phase of adolescence presents unique challenges for girls globally, with diverse opportunities and expectations that differ significantly from their male counterparts (Fergus, Isobel & Winslow, 2020).

The pandemic has disproportionately affected girls, particularly those from low-income and rural backgrounds. Threats include increased child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and gender-based violence, exacerbated by the economic fallout forcing many into marriage for financial reasons (Giannini, S., 2020). Teenage pregnancies contribute to higher rates of child marriage, and survivors of rape face challenges, including a greater likelihood of dropping out of school.

Recognizing the need to address the pandemic's impact on girls and young women, a study was conducted, aligning with the ongoing focus on gender equality and girls' rights (UNICEF report, 2021). The study primarily involves interviews with young women to gain insights into how COVID-19 has shaped their lives.

### **Literature Review:**

Disruptions to essential health services (e.g., family planning), early and forced marriage, transactional sex, and employment that increases time spent with men are among the factors

that raise the risk of adolescent pregnancy, STDs, HIV, and violence. During the 2014 Ebola outbreak, early pregnancy rates increased in Sierra Leone, rising as high as 65% in some communities (Plan International, 2015; Giannini, 2020). Pregnancy can reduce the chances that girls will be able to continue their education and result in additional delays in school re-enrollment. Delays and disturbances in obstetric care during the 2014 Ebola outbreak also increased the risk of unfavorable outcomes, such as miscarriage (World Bank, 2020; Chattu & Yaya, 2020).

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2020), COVID-19 has already impacted the availability of family planning services at health facilities and the supply chains for contraceptives. Financial strains and food shortages (Sharma NC., 2020) may also contribute to an increase in early and forced marriage cases as families look to downsize. Marriage may also be seen by families as a shield against the stigma associated with adolescent pregnancy outside of marriage and sexual assault survivors (UNICEF & IRC, 2020; Girls Not Brides, 2020).

M. Mohan Kumar, P. Karpaga Priya, Sunil K. Panigrahi, Utsav Raj, and Vineet K. Pathak highlight the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teenagers. The "Micro Plan for Containing Local Transmission of Coronavirus Disease" emphasizes the involvement of community health workers, including ASHAs, ANMs, and AWWs, in COVID-19-related activities. However, this focus has led to challenges in delivering routine benefits to teens, such as iron-folic acid tablets, sanitary napkins, additional nourishment, and vaccination programs through Anganwadi Centers (AWCs).

Additionally, there is no prospect that schools will reopen anytime soon after being closed for more than two months. 89% of teenagers have been forced to drop out of school due to the present pandemic; this translates to roughly 1.54 billion students, of which 0.74 billion are females (UNESCO, 2020). Teenagers who are trapped at home due to school closures as a preventative measure experience social isolation. Schools have been opened to youngsters so they can communicate with their peers and let out all of their feelings and anxieties (Hupkau C, Petrongolo B, 2021).

Teenagers will be more vulnerable to all of these COVID-19 pandemic-related effects, including factors like: (Hupkau C, Petrongolo B., 2020)

1. Increased school drop-outs (Lee J., 2020)
2. Increase gender gaps in education (Sharma NC, 2020)
3. Stress and other mental health disorders (Lee J., 2020)
4. Smartphone dependence or addiction (Lee J., 2020)
5. Early age of initiating smoking, alcohol, or drugs (Lee J., 2020)
6. Interrupted learning depriving opportunities for growth and development (Lee J., 2020)
7. Parents unprepared for distance and homeschooling, particularly those in lower socioeconomic status and illiterate parents (Sharma NC, 2020)
8. Poor menstrual hygiene (Brides GN., 2020)
9. Increase in child labor (Brides GN., 2020)
10. Early and forced marriage (Brides GN., 2020)
11. Early pregnancy (teenage pregnancy) (Pallavi Gahlaut, 2021)
12. Nutritional problems (due to stoppage of weekly IFA Supplementation [WIFS] and mid-day meal scheme/program) (Sharma NC, 2020)
13. Increase in exposure to violence, exploitation (including sexual), abuse/maltreatment, and neglect (Sharma NC, 2020)

The severe effects of COVID-19 have disproportionately affected teenage girls and young women, notably in India, according to a report by Pallavi Gahlaut, Global G.L.O.W. partnership coordinator from SES India. Girls are making decisions about their futures,

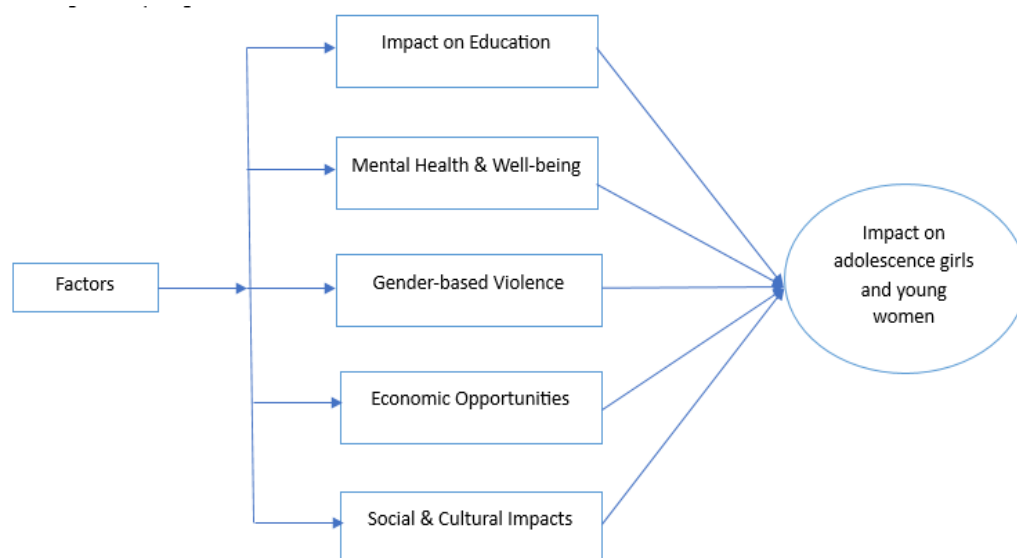
including their schooling and marriage, in later adolescence. Their freedoms may be restricted in accordance with gendered norms about female behaviour and girls' susceptibility to sexual violence, as the weight of home chores increases. Consequently, studies reveal a decrease in the prevalence of child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and poverty among girls who attend secondary education. Sadly, females' access to school has been severely hampered by the pandemic.

The pandemic's socioeconomic impact may lead to over 1.2 million additional girls dropping out of school in East Asia and the Pacific, due to factors like income generation needs, increased household responsibilities, early marriage, and unintended pregnancy (Pallavi Gahlaut, 2020, based on UNESCO research). Lockdown measures also heighten the risk of early pregnancy and sexual violence [UNECA], making it challenging for girls to pursue education. Save the Children estimates an additional 61,000 girls at risk of child marriage and 118,000 at risk of adolescent pregnancy in the EAP region due to COVID-19. Even before the pandemic, the region faced learning challenges, with 15 million girls out of school and enrolled girls lacking quality education, jeopardizing crucial skills like information and technology literacy (Seo, N, 2020; Obama, M., & Gates, M., 2020).

The pandemic has greatly impacted young girls and women in various aspects of their lives. Our study aims to comprehend their experiences and perspectives, which will empower them. Rural girls' perspectives will contribute to creating a more equal world where they can shape their own destiny (Obama, M., & Gates, M., 2020).

The figure below gives us an understanding about the factors that are included in the study. This research delves into the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically focusing on factors that influence the well-being of young women (Chattu, V. K., & Yaya, S., 2020). Through a comprehensive exploration, the study identifies and analyses key elements shaping the post-pandemic landscape for this demographic. By uncovering these factors, the research aims to contribute valuable insights that inform targeted interventions, support strategies, and policy initiatives (Fergus, Isobel & Winslow, 2020) to enhance the overall well-being and resilience of young women in the wake of the pandemic.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO UNDERSTAND THE FACTORS THAT HAVE AN INFLUENCE OF PANDEMIC ON ADOLESCENCE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN**



The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a unique obstacle to girls' education, particularly for girls from low-income homes and girls living in rural areas. The future of the girl child lies in the decisions and actions we take today.

Adolescent females are not ready for parenthood and marriage. Early marriage often limits girls' education and ability to make decisions, leading to health problems and vulnerability to sexual violence. Limited income streams affect girls' financial stability. We can empower girls by providing education and opportunities, ensuring access to healthcare, promoting gender equality, and creating a safe environment for them to thrive.

The study primarily focuses on the following aspects:

- To better understand their current realities and to hear directly from them about their concerns and priorities.
- To intentionally listen to young women, focus on their voices, entrust them with decision-making responsibilities, and invest in them.
- To call attention to the experiences of young women from underserved communities and to build knowledge around how practitioners can facilitate girls by bringing to the front and centre in their relief interventions

### **Research gap**

The research on the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the well-being of young women reveals a notable gap in understanding the nuanced interplay of specific factors. While existing studies touch upon broad aspects, such as mental health and economic repercussions, there is a need for more in-depth exploration of factors like social support networks, educational disruptions, and access to healthcare. Furthermore, the intersectionality of several identities—such as race, social class, and place of residence—in shaping the experiences of young women after the epidemic has received less consideration. In order to develop focused treatments and policies that address the variety of issues encountered by young women in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that these gaps be closed.

### **Methodology**

The first step involves the preparation of a questionnaire aligning with the project's objectives. Following this, a pilot study will be conducted to ensure the clarity and effectiveness of the questions.

Subsequently, a cross-sectional survey will be carried out among adolescent girls and young women aged 10 to 24 in rural areas around Chennai. The survey will primarily employ face-to-face modalities, with an online survey as a contingency measure if face-to-face interactions are not feasible due to prevailing conditions.

Upon completion of data collection, a meticulous analysis will be undertaken in the fourth step. The insights derived from this analysis will be disseminated to multiple policymakers. This dissemination aims to empower policymakers with valuable information, fostering the creation of a more just and equitable world. The ultimate goal is to recognize and uphold girls' potential and their right to shape their own futures.

### **Research Limitations**

Although the samples obtained from the quantitative survey may not be fully representative of the population of girls and young women aged 10-24, this provides an opportunity to reassess the sampling methods and improve future research efforts to ensure a more accurate representation of the population.

### **Analysis & Findings**

This article provides valuable insights into the impact of COVID-19 measures on girls and young women. It sheds light on the challenges they face due to these measures and seeks to identify any gender-specific effects that they may experience. By understanding these issues, we can work to address them and ensure that girls and young women are not disproportionately affected by pandemic and related measures.



After analysing the data provided, it is evident that a majority of the girls and young women surveyed fall in the age group of 15-24, with 61% of respondents being between 15-19 years old, and 32% between 20-24 years. The remaining 7% of respondents were between the ages of 10-14 years.

In terms of educational qualifications, it was found that a significant proportion of the respondents were graduates, with 41% of respondents having completed their graduation.

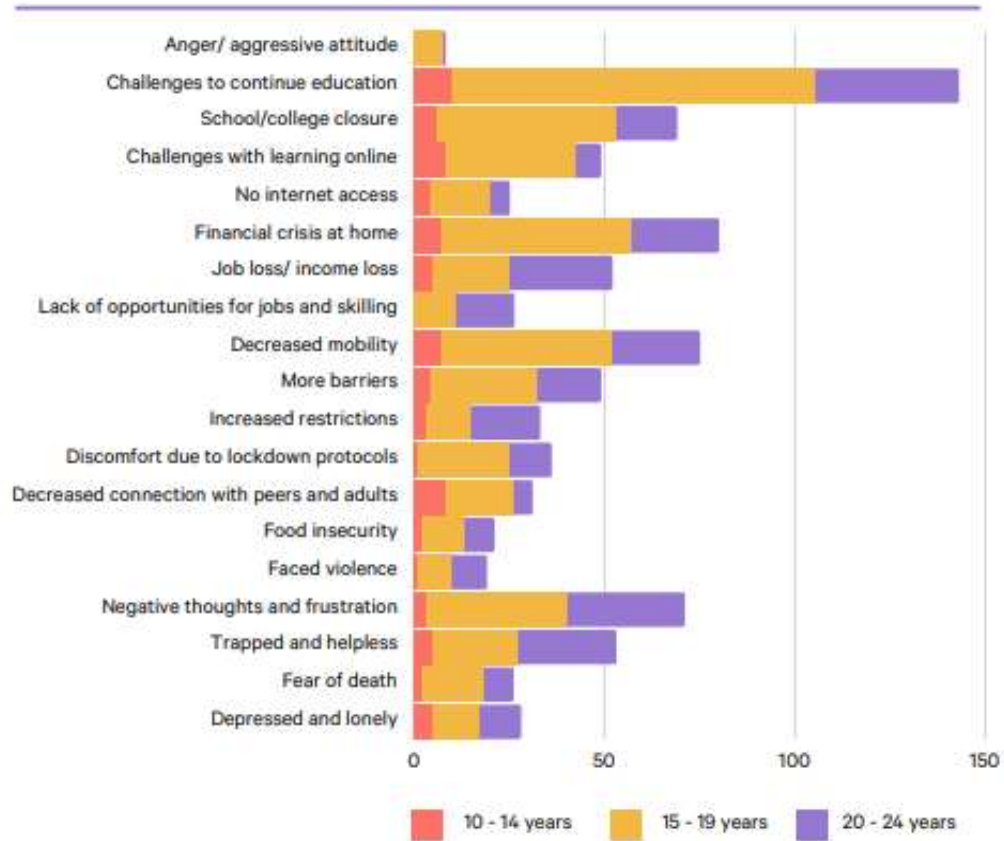
Furthermore, family size was another aspect covered in the data, which revealed that 79% of respondents came from families with 1-4 members, while 17% belonged to families with 5-8 members. The family size of the remaining respondents was not reported.

Lastly, religion was another parameter that was analysed, with 53% of respondents belonging to the Hindu religion, followed by 34% of respondents belonging to the Muslim religion. Interestingly, 6% of the respondents chose not to respond to this question.

The pandemic has posed significant challenges to the lives of many respondents. It is a fact that the most common challenge reported by those aged between 15-24 years is to continue their education. Financial crisis at home is the next most important reason. Due to the pandemic situation, mobility has also decreased, which is another challenge. Negative thoughts and frustration have been reported by some individuals as a significant problem. Moreover, the age group of 20-24 years faces challenges such as continuing their education,

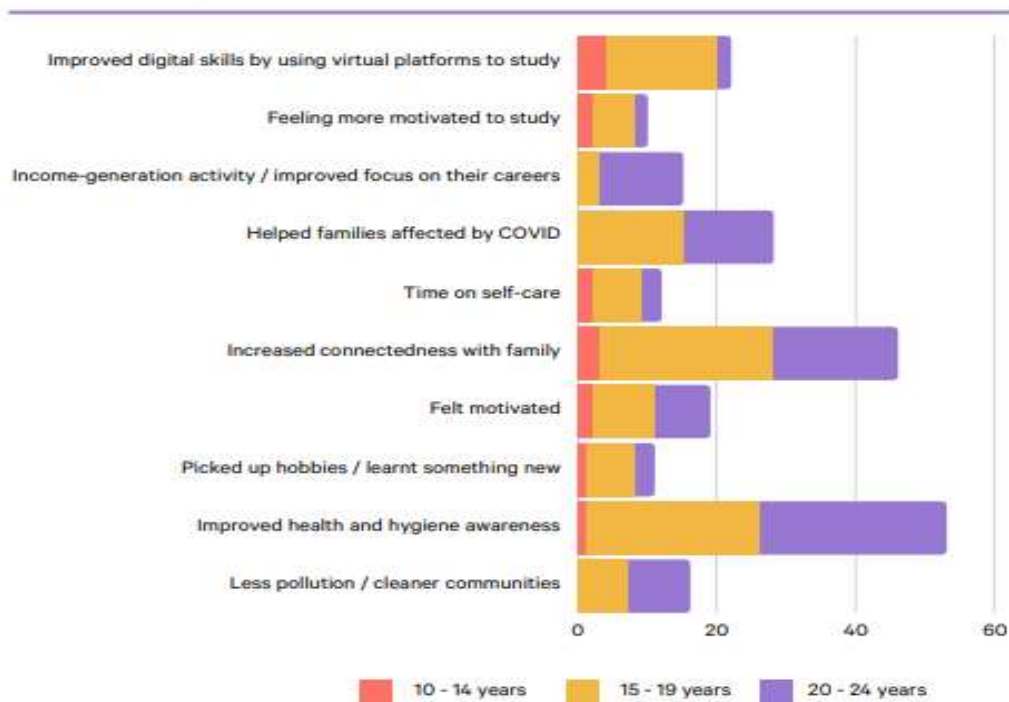
feeling trapped and helpless, job loss or reduced income, and experiencing depression and loneliness.

### Challenges Due to COVID

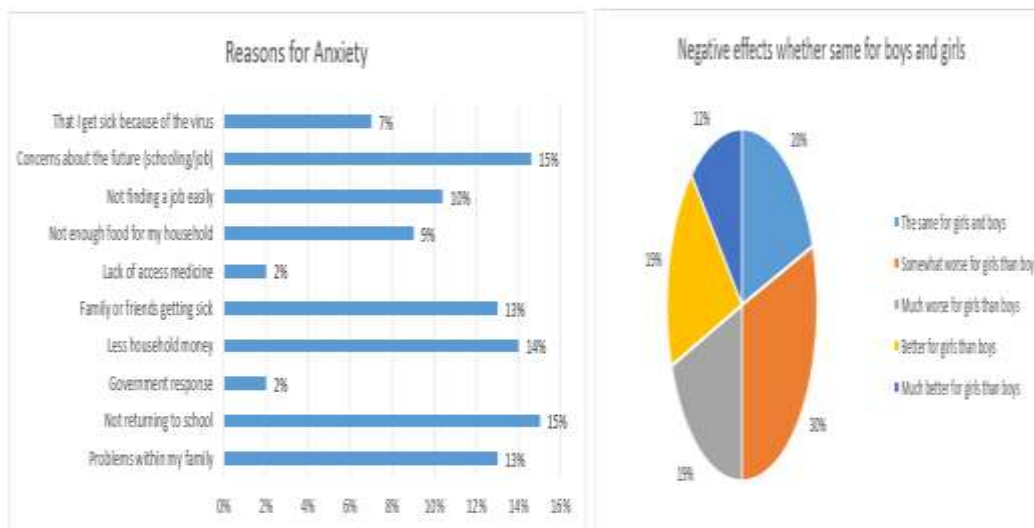


The study reveals that individuals between the ages of 15-19 have reported numerous positive impacts during the pandemic. These include enhanced family connections, improved health and hygiene awareness, assistance to families affected by COVID-19, and the acquisition of digital skills. Additionally, respondents between the ages of 20-24 have noticed the positive effects of reduced pollution levels and cleaner communities. They have also focused on career development and income generation activities. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the study highlights that many positive outcomes have emerged, motivating people to persevere.

### Positive Impact



Girls and young women often feel anxious and worried about their future, according to a recent study. This was the main reason for their anxiety, along with concerns about not being able to go back to school and financial difficulties at home. The study also showed that family or friends getting sick was a major cause of depression and anxiety for these girls and young women. Unfortunately, this situation left them feeling helpless and unable to find a way out.



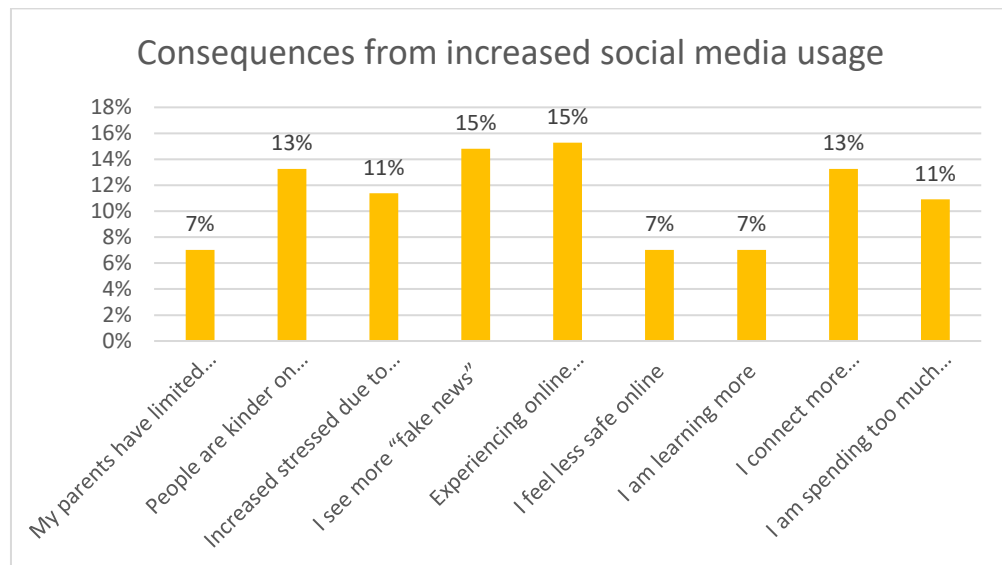
The study revealed that when girls and young women were asked about the negative effects of the pandemic, 20% of them believed that the impact was similar for both genders. The study also highlighted that the media's coverage of the pandemic has been primarily focused on the primary effects, while the secondary effects (Fergus, Isobel & Winslow, Esther, 2020) are only now starting to gain attention. These secondary effects could have more severe consequences for girls and young women, despite their lack of awareness about it. It is noteworthy that girls are more affected by certain negative effects, such as being forced



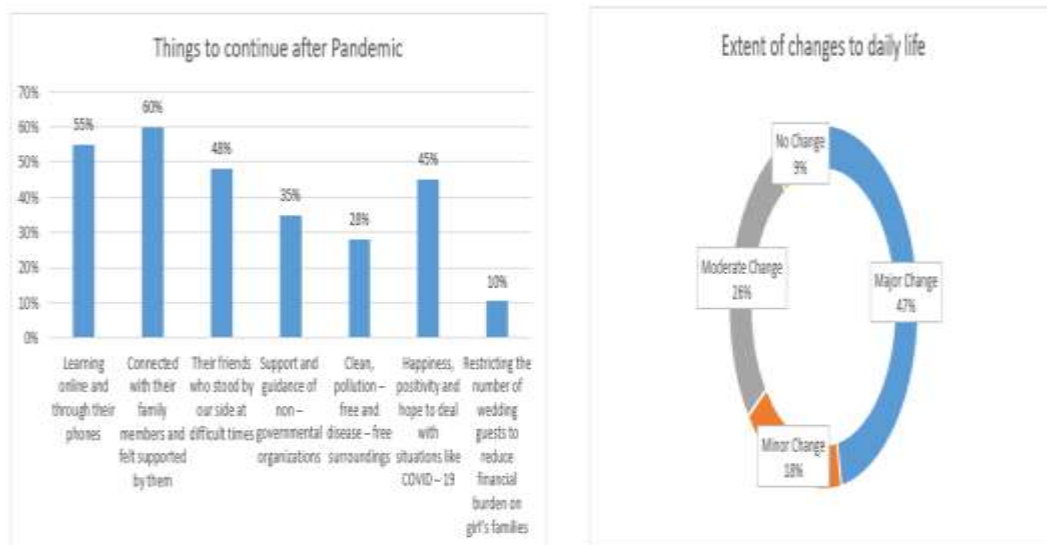
to stay at home and not being able to study. These effects can lead to mental health issues, increased domestic responsibilities, and a higher likelihood of dropping out of school, as suggested by studies in the report. 51% of adolescent girls and young women believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected both genders equally. This suggests that the pandemic's primary impacts have received significant global attention. However, the secondary effects are likely to have a more severe impact on girls and women. It's essential to recognize and address these secondary impacts to help everyone cope with the pandemic's effects.

The survey conducted among girls and young women aimed to explore the effects of increased social media usage on their lives. The responses revealed some interesting insights that suggest a mixed impact of social media usage. Specifically, 15% of the participants reported experiencing a combination of positive and negative outcomes (Fergus, Isobel & Winslow, Esther, 2020). On one hand, the survey found that people are kinder on social media now (13%) and that individuals are spending too much time online (13%). Moreover, a significant proportion of respondents (11%) reported feeling more stressed and overwhelmed due to the amount of virus-related news on social media. On the other hand, social media usage seems to have brought some positive outcomes, including meaningful connections with friends and family members and increased learning opportunities.

Despite the mixed impact, most participants (89%) reported feeling more connected to their loved ones, which is a positive outcome of increased social media usage. However, it's important to note that a small minority of the respondents (11%) reported feeling less safe online, which is a concerning issue that needs to be addressed.



The survey results reveal that many girls and young women have found positive ways to cope during and after the pandemic. It's encouraging to note that 60% of the respondents expressed a desire to continue connecting with their family members. Family support has been a vital source of strength and comfort for them during these difficult times. Moreover, 45% of the respondents value the importance of friends who stood by them during challenging times. These positive relationships have proven to be a valuable asset in their lives and have helped them build resilience.



A survey of girls & young women found 33% believe COVID-19 negatively impacted their future employment prospects due to fewer job opportunities. 25% were concerned about their future income due to job losses or salary cuts. 19% had to put their education on hold, which could affect their career prospects. The survey highlights the need for support systems to help young women navigate pandemic challenges.

The COVID-19 epidemic impacted mental health more than the actual cases of infection. Reports of deaths, protective gear shortages, and job losses caused anxiety to rise during lockdowns. Social media played a crucial role in connecting people and providing COVID-19 information, but misinformation caused confusion and uneasiness.

The pandemic has exposed girls to various hazards such as impeded access to education, employment, and basic amenities, as well as increased risks of violence and harmful practices. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable and often overlooked in policy and research activities. Data on the pandemic's impact on girls is limited, highlighting the need for more research and ethical data collection guidelines.

## Implications

Prioritizing the needs of girls in response plans, investments, and initiatives is crucial. Educating ourselves and others can create positive change for girls across the globe.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the education system has been disrupted, and households have been negatively impacted, leading to an increased risk of girls dropping out of school. To ensure that girls' specific needs are taken into account, UNICEF recommends a gender-sensitive approach in all analyses and assessments of solutions and decisions related to education provision. This will help keep girls' needs at the center of the analysis of solutions and decisions.

**Educational Initiatives:** Due to the potential disruptions in education caused by the pandemic, it is important to investigate how academic setbacks might impact the well-being of adolescent girls and young women. A thorough examination of the need for targeted educational initiatives aimed at mitigating these effects and promoting continued learning is necessary.

**Mental Health Support:** It is crucial to assess the psychological impact of the pandemic on young women and explore the need for enhanced mental health support. Suggestions for providing accessible mental health resources and interventions tailored to their specific needs should be considered.

**Economic Empowerment:** The economic implications of the pandemic on young women, including potential job losses or financial strain, must be examined. Measures to promote economic empowerment, such as skills training, mentorship programs, or policies supporting women in the workforce, should be proposed.

**Social Support Networks:** The role of social support networks should be examined to lessen the impact of the pandemic on adolescent girls and young women. Suggestions should be made to strengthen community and familial support systems.

**Health and Wellness Programs:** The long-term health implications of the pandemic, such as disruptions in healthcare access and potential changes in health behaviours, need to be considered. Health and wellness programs should be proposed to address these concerns and promote overall physical well-being.

**Policy Recommendations:** Specific policy recommendations should be provided to address the unique challenges faced by adolescent girls and young women. Policies that support their well-being in areas such as education, employment, and healthcare should be advocated for.

**Intersectionality:** It is important to recognize the intersectionality of factors influencing well-being, such as socioeconomic status, race, and cultural background. Suggestions should be tailored to acknowledge and address the diverse experiences of adolescent girls and young women.

It is highly recommended for donors, governments, and organizations to give utmost priority and allocate sufficient funds for initiatives that are specifically targeted towards empowering girls. This should be an explicit category in grant proposals and project plans to ensure that it receives adequate attention and resources. This approach will significantly contribute to the success of the overall project. In addition, donors and organizations should provide or facilitate funding for girl-led groups, networks, and local women's rights organizations that support them. The financing should include resources for capacity-building, network-strengthening, strategic activities, and core operating costs. By doing so, we can ensure that girls are given the necessary support to fulfil their potential and become effective agents of change in their communities.

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